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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000391

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF, CA/OCS, S/ES-O

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: REPORTS OF ETHNIC UNREST IN CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

REF: HANOI 962

1. (SBU) The Consulate General has received credible reports of ethnic unrest in the Central Highlands Province of Dak Lak. According to several reliable second-hand sources, groups of ethnic Ede began moving into the provincial capital of Buon Me Thuot early on the morning of Saturday, April 10. Some sources reported that these ethnic minority persons were armed with guns and targeting government facilities. Other sources stated that they were carrying only rocks and stoning policemen and government vehicles. A ConGen FSN returning to Ho Chi Minh City from a trip to Buon Me Thuot Saturday morning confirmed that police and soldiers had established roadblocks at points along the main road connecting Dak Lak with HCMC. While he was not prevented from traveling in the direction of HCMC, he noted that all vehicles traveling in the other direction were being stopped. ConGen FSN also observed large numbers of ethnic minority persons gathered along the roadside. A contact with sources in Buon Me Thuot City said that police were stopping all ethnic minority persons from entering the city.

2. (SBU) Late on April 9, the U.S.-based Montagnard Foundation released a press statement indicating that "nonviolent demonstrations" were scheduled to begin on April 10 "all across" the Central Highlands in protest of GVN restrictions on "freedom to worship Christ." ConGen and Embassy officers had been scheduled to travel to the region April 10-14 to observe Easter services and hold official meetings (reftel). The HCMC External Relations Office (the southern branch office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) contacted ConGenoff on the morning of April 10, informing him that "the Central Highlands are closed to all foreigners" and that all scheduled official meetings in the provinces of Dak Lak, Gia Lai, and Kon Tum -- which had been confirmed the evening before -- were now canceled for "security reasons." ConGen FSN contacted telephone centers in the towns of Pleiku, in Gia Lai province, and Kon Tum, in Kon Tum province, where operators indicated there were no current disturbances.

3. (SBU) Mission has released a warden message advising Amcits to defer travel to the province of Dak Lak. Mission officers have alerted the Operations Center, and continue to monitor the situation. Poloffs will attempt to travel overland to Dak Lak to assess the situation first-hand.

O'BRIEN